DEC 3 1966

FOIAb3b [redacted]

Vietnam Exclusive

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The morning sky was clear over the South China Sea, but the weather turned murky as we approached the coast of North Vietnam. Our group of four Skyraiders had taken off from the *USS Ranger* 45 minutes earlier—at nine o'clock last February 1—and we were flying in formation at 10,000 feet. We zigzagged to look for a hole in the overcast and to keep their radar-controlled guns from locking onto us.

All at once flak appeared as noisy smudges nearby. I didn't have much time to notice it. I checked my armament switches and gunsights. Then in my headset I heard a pilot shout, "I got a target. There it is at nine o'clock." I looked down and saw it—an antiaircraft battery at a road intersection. I called my number: "Five-oh-four rolling in," I said. I pulled the stick, rolled on my back and started into my dive.

Suddenly *boom, boom, boom*. A 57-mm shell knocked off part of my right wing. Another burst hit my engine. It sputtered and quit. I shouted, "Mayday, Mayday" into my radio. I leveled out and aimed at the target quickly, then dumped all my ordnance. Miraculously I hit the target. The antiaircraft battery had gotten me, but I knocked it out.

CPYRGHT

ESCAPED FROM A RED PRISON'

CPYRGHT

By Lt. j.g. [redacted]

Gaunt, hollow-eyed and shrunk to 93 pounds, Dengler recuperates aboard the carrier Ranger [redacted] days after leaving the ship for a strike in North Vietnam.

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As I came out of my bombing run I knew I was going to crash. The plane was hardly controllable, and I was losing altitude fast. I jettisoned my bombs and dived closer. I thought that I still had enough altitude to make it over the ridge ahead, and I hoped I'd be able to find a clearing. As I skimmed over that ridge I realized I was in trouble: The only clearing I saw was less than 300 feet long and the surrounding trees were about 150 feet high and three feet thick. I pulled back a little on the stick, and the plane began to shudder. I hit a tree, and my right wing sheared off; the plane veered wildly as my left wing hit another tree. The fuselage flipped over two or three times. There's no padding at all in the cockpit, but I was strapped in tight. I tucked my legs and put my hands in front of my face. I must have been knocked unconscious during the crash, because I remember only struggling to open the jammed canopy and then being on my back 100 yards from the plane. A big plume of smoke was rising into the sky.

I tried to get my senses together. My knee was blue, and it hurt like hell. My Mae West was gone, my helmet was gone, and blood was running down my neck. My first thought was to get far away from the crash. I crawled across a little creek and must have traveled about half a mile when I heard voices. I hobbled into some bushes, and slowly the voices faded away. I broke off some little sticks and bound them to my knee with elastic bandages to make a splint. Then I checked my survival gear.

I was still wearing my heavy green flight suit, and a nylon sleeping bag that I had made on the carrier was taped to my back. I had a .38 revolver, a brand-new radio, a compass, a plastic map, a canteen, a few cakes of soap, some fishhooks and a mirror. I also carried some high-protein foods—pepperoni sausage and nuts—as well as medicine. Right away I took my malaria pills. Then I began to think about getting rid of some of the stuff.

All of a sudden somebody opened up with an automatic weapon. Bullets hit right and left—two or three feet from me. I dived under a bush and tried to camouflage myself by pulling that green sleeping bag over my head. I didn't want those guys to get my radio—all they'd have to do was turn on the beeper, and a helicopter would come hovering in to get nailed with a machine gun. I stowed all my gear—radio, gun, the whole works—in a hole in a tree and piled some leaves over it. Then I started crawling away on my belly. I suppose I should have gone back to pick up my gear, but I decided against it. Perhaps I was overconfident because, as a boy in Germany, I'd always had to fend for myself. Then, too, I had "escaped" four times in Navy survival training. I said, "Man, I've got it knocked—I don't need this, I don't need that. I'll make it on my own."

I knew that my target had been in North Vietnam very near the Laotian border, but I didn't know where I had come down. If I headed east through North Vietnam I might reach the ocean. But then what? I didn't have a signaling device anymore, so nobody would pick me up. But suppose I went the other way, to Laos? The jungle there would be thicker and easier to hide in. I still had my compass, and I decided to head west.

For the rest of the first day, I kept walking, avoiding trails and clearings and occasional animal traps. At night I slipped into my sleeping bag. It was hot and miserable, with bugs everywhere, and I couldn't sleep. At dawn I started moving again, and soon I got careless. Back in the States they'd told me "always avoid clearings, trails and water holes." Now I said the heck with that. Why should I walk in the bush when the trail is easy going?

They caught me 15 minutes later. A couple of guys jumped out of the bush and started yelling and screaming. They wore sunglasses and American-style uniforms—khaki trousers and rubber boots. "Ute, ute," they shouted. I didn't know who they were and couldn't understand them, but I stopped. I guessed they were Pathet Lao troops—pro-Communist Laotians. One of them held an M 1 at my head while the other searched me. They tied my hands and hit me in the head a couple of times with their fists. Then they took away my watch, my compass and my ID cards.

For the rest of that afternoon they ran me along the trail. About five o'clock we reached a clearing where they tied me to a tree. Then a pleasant-faced man in a brown uniform walked over to inspect me. He wore a sidearm, and he had a red star on his belt buckle, so I figured he was the leader of this gang. The guards had given this man my Geneva Convention card and my regular ID card, and he was trying to read them upside down. For a moment I had a crazy impulse to laugh. But four or five guards had rifles pointing at me.

The officer and his men talked for a while. Then they drove big stakes into the ground and spread-eagled me between them. I spent the night trying to shoo away the mosquitoes by moving my head. Then the leeches started crawling up my legs. A leech is about as long as a needle and not much thicker. Sometimes when it drops off, it's sucked so much blood that it's as thick as your little finger. Then you just continue bleeding.

For the next several days we walked, four or five guards in front of me, another four or five behind me. They had tied my hands, but I was still able to eat a handful of rice in the morning, another handful in late afternoon. We walked for hours yet probably made only eight miles a day. The trails twisted up and down so many hills that we had to zigzag constantly in the relentless heat. Occasionally we stopped at small villages. Men, women and children came out of their huts and clustered about me. Most of the women were barebreasted. They were very polite, and sometimes they'd give me water. But I knew they were afraid of me. If I moved, they'd jump back. The men wore loincloths, and some of them carried knives. They screamed at me and waved their fists, and I could see hate in their eyes.

On the afternoon of the fifth day we went into a huge cave where soldiers were milling around some Russian jeeps. For the first time since my capture I was able to communicate with someone. One of the Laotian officers started speaking French. I remember some French from my school years, so we could at least understand each other. At first this officer was friendly. He had a camera and took my picture. For nearly a week I'd been eating nothing but rice. He gave me some sugar and a couple of eggs, and he told me that I could write some letters. Then he pulled out a piece of paper and asked me to sign my name. It was typed and phrased in perfect English and it said, in effect, that the Americans were dropping bombs on innocent women and children and that, although I personally opposed this policy, I was forced to fly on these missions by the U.S. Government. I wouldn't sign that paper.

The friendly officer said something to the guards, and they beat me on the head with bamboo sticks, then pummeled my face and ears with their fists. "Bai-bai. Guen, guen," they said. Sign that paper and we will let you go. Next morning the officer shoved that paper in my face again. When I refused to sign it, he told the guards to bring a water buffalo [illegible]

They tied my hands, then my feet, and ran the

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'They tied me then led the rope to the buffalo.'

CPYRGHT

rope 15 or 20 feet to the buffalo's collar. Laughing, they prodded the animal until it trotted. I was dragged headfirst over sharp roots sticking out of the trail. My clothes were tattered; the skin on my legs was shredded, and I was bleeding a lot. I got madder than hell and called them a lot of dirty names. Then I passed out.

This went on for nearly two days. I can't remember how many times I passed out, but I know that I never signed their paper. Finally, on the afternoon of the seventh day, they gave up and marched me away.

Just to make sure that I didn't try to run off, the guards made me hang my shoes around my neck. And without shoes, an American just can't walk in that jungle. The heat was almost unbearable. It hadn't rained for months, and everything was dry. Finally we came to a muddy water hole, and they let me drink. For some reason they hadn't taken away my halazone tablets yet, so I borrowed a bottle from one of the guards, put the tablets in the water and waited for a few minutes before I swallowed the stuff.

Throughout the march I always had 14 or 15 guards around me—Pathet Laos wearing peaked leather caps, blue trousers and shoes. One of them carried an old Russian grease gun; another had a carbine; the rest had Chinese rifles. They gave me rice, occasional pieces of chicken and some edible fern that they steamed. We kept moving, but I had no way of knowing where I was being taken. Whenever we stopped, the guards always tied me down to a tree or a hut. And there was always somebody watching me. All the guards smoked—either bamboo pipes or cigarettes rolled from banana leaves. And one of these guards kept a mirror inside his tobacco box. I watched him carefully to find out where he put that box.

After sunset on the eighth day it soon got pitch dark. On the way up a steep hill I kept moaning and flopping my hands over the shoulders of the guard with the mirror, who was walking ahead of me. He'd stuck the tobacco in the upper pocket of his jacket. I leaned on him hard, reached over and pulled it out without his ever knowing what happened. Then I flicked the box into the bushes and stuck the mirror in my trousers.

A few hours later we reached another village and went to sleep. As usual, one guard slept on my left, another on my right, and they had tied me so that I couldn't move without waking one of them. But when the guard on my left kept putting his leg over mine, and I kept kicking it back, he didn't wake up. The other guard was sound asleep too. This was my chance. I strained to free myself, trying to wriggle out of the ropes. Sweat ran into my eyes. I struggled with the loops at my wrists, afraid my panting would wake someone. Finally I slipped free and crept to the porch.

Almost immediately a flock of chickens and pigs started screeching. I raced back inside and lay down next to the guards with my heart pounding like a subway train. When they still didn't wake up, I decided to try again. The moon was just coming out from behind the clouds. In a nearby hut I could see a man sitting smoking a cigarette. He was watching me. I froze. The man got up. But he didn't say a word. He just went inside his hut.

My shoes were hanging on the porch, but I didn't stop to put them on until I'd crawled about 300 yards. I knew now that the trail was dangerous, so I dived into the jungle. Somewhere in the distance I heard a dog barking. If I could climb a mountain, I could use that mirror to signal an aircraft. Then a helicopter would come.

But now I was exhausted. I lay down and slept until dawn and then started for the nearest mountain. About nine o'clock I reached the top. There was nothing to do but wait, and there was no food, no shade. I hadn't had anything to drink in hours, and the sun was so hot that I almost passed out. Then I saw two Royal Laotian Air Force T-28's. I signaled, and one of them turned in my direction. I was sure he had radioed a helicopter, so I waited for a few more hours. But nobody came. At three o'clock I thought I'd better get down from there before I died of thirst. My strength was really gone: I kept falling and sliding down vines, and when I reached the bottom, I was barely able to crawl. Somehow, I found an animal trail and followed it to a water hole. *Boom*—in I fell, head over heels. I had taken just one drink when they caught me again.

There were about 20 of them in blue Pathet Lao uniforms, and they were yelling and screaming. One of them smashed at my head with the butt of his rifle, and as I moved back he hit me on the shoulder. The gun went off and shot another guard through both legs. I thought they were going to kill me then, but they made a stretcher for their buddy and took care of him before turning back to me. They put a rope around my legs and tied my hands behind my back—so tight that after a while my hands were completely numb. Then they hung me upside down from a tree. They kicked me in the face and whipped me until I passed out. When I came to, I was lying on the ground. One of the guards hung me upside down again and shoved a large ant hive in my face. Thousands of little black ants started biting my nose and eyes and mouth. I think I screamed for almost a minute before I passed out again.

Later that afternoon—this was the ninth day after my crash—they marched me to a cave and stuck me in a hole that was roughly two feet across and four feet deep. There was about a foot of water at the bottom, and my arms and legs were still tied, so I couldn't sleep.

For the next few days they marched me along the trails in eastern Laos. They gave me water and a couple of handfuls of rice, but I was extremely weak. I stumbled a lot trying to keep up with them and passed out a couple of times. Then, on the morning of the 14th day, we reached the prison camp.

It wasn't what I'd imagined at all; I thought I was going to a camp like you see in the movies. But this was just a collection of bamboo huts sitting on stilts about four feet high. I knew other

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'I knew I'd never fly or see my mother again.'

CPYRGHT

prisoners had to be there, so I began to shout, "Hey, you guys, what's up in there? What's the scoop?" But I didn't hear a sound.

They shoved me into one of the huts, clapped handcuffs on my wrists and stuck my feet into wooden blocks that must have weighed 30 or 40 pounds. It was very dark in there, but the door was open about half a foot, and I wiggled toward it. That's when I saw six other prisoners in another hut a few feet away.

For security reasons I won't say much about them, but several were in bad shape. Most of their teeth had fallen out, and I could see big sores on their bodies. And they were also wearing handcuffs. I shouted to them, and right away a guard came and told me to shut up. When he left, I called softly to the other hut. One guy called back that his name was Duane Martin; he was an Air Force lieutenant, a helicopter pilot, and he had been captured nine months earlier. Some of the others had been there more than two years.

I realized there was a chance that one of them might be a stool pigeon, so I told them only that I flew a Skyraider. I didn't want to say anything about the carrier or about the targets I'd bombed. It didn't matter, because what they were really interested in was news from outside. What did cars look like now? What was happening in Europe, Cuba and China? What could you see on television? Then I told them that President Kennedy was dead. Duane Martin had said that, too, but they hadn't believed him.

I was kept isolated for about a week, and then I was moved into the other hut. Until a month ago, the prisoners said, conditions hadn't been too bad. They'd even been allowed to boil water at night. Then Little Hitler came and everything had changed.

I'll never forget that guy as long as I live. He was short—about five feet two inches—and he wore a blue-and-yellow loincloth. He had dark skin, little squirrelly eyes and a big belly. He always carried a submachine gun. He did his best to torment us, and he succeeded lots of times. He knew, for example, that we wanted water desperately, so he'd bring some in a pot and place it just out of our reach. Then he'd pour the water on the ground and laugh. Another of his tricks was to stand one of us in footblocks outside the hut and take the man's handcuffs off. Then he'd tell the other guards that the prisoner refused to wear handcuffs and should be punished. Right away they'd beat him and fire bullets at his feet.

Of all the guards, and there were 10 or 15 at all times, Little Hitler was undoubtedly the worst. Still, he had competition—Crazy Horse, for example. He really did have a face like a horse, and he really was crazy in a brutal way. Then there were Sot and Dam and Windy—he was a sly son of a gun who was always sneaking around corners, trying to catch us doing something. And Jumbo—I shouldn't forget him—a fat, dreamy-faced guy who didn't care about anything. He sat outside his hut all day making baskets out of rattan fiber, and he never bothered us at all. It was hot as hell during the day and bitterly cold at night. Nobody had a match or a lighter—we just rubbed bamboo together to make fire. I still had my sleeping bag, but it was good only for keeping leeches and mosquitoes away.

One morning—I think it was eight days after I was brought to the camp—Crazy Horse entered our hut with a big smile on his face. The prisoners who had been confined longest could understand him. We were going to be set free, he said, free to go home. We just had to walk to another headquarters. We packed up our belongings: spoons and water cups that we'd carved out of bamboo, together with some thread and porcupine needles.

Then we started marching. All of us were stumbling along, tied to one another by handcuffs. We should have known that Crazy Horse was lying—Crazy Horse always lied. We didn't reach a headquarters, only another prison camp, like the first one but more heavily fortified. Our bamboo huts stood on log foundations about three feet high. The guards shoved four of us in one of these huts and placed the other prisoners in a hut across the way.

Now we settled into monotonous routine. Every morning we'd wake up with the chickens. One guy would holler, "Kopa-tie-a-chow"—I have to go to the latrine. There was a hole in the ground 30 or 40 yards away. Five or six guards would remove his footblocks and escort him there. But if he stayed there longer than half a minute, the guards would start shooting. We soon decided it was safer to relieve ourselves in bamboo containers inside the huts. One of us would have to empty the containers every second or third day and would run the risk of being shot—but this was better than having all of us shot at every morning.

At about nine o'clock the guards would give us rice. Sometimes all seven of us would be allowed to eat this morning meal at a table outside the main hut, and we'd have about 10 minutes to talk before the guards yelled "Kuo-kuo" and shoved us back inside. During the day the heat was so unbearable that the guards not on duty simply went to sleep. In midafternoon they'd wake up, go out to check their traps for animals and look for edible leaves and bark. Around five they'd let us out again for another 10-minute meal before putting us back in footblocks for the rest of the night.

The most nerve-racking part of the routine was the singing. Every night the guards would sing the same propaganda songs, over and over. Now and then the guards would push us out of our huts and punish us—also part of their routine. They'd hang us upside down from trees or shoot bullets at our feet. One time a guard put an M-1 to my head, and I thought he was going to pull the trigger. I remember saying, "Oh, God, that's an American weapon. Our tax dollars paid for that." Then he laughed and took it away.

After the first few weeks at the camp we developed a routine of our own. Saturday night was our hoot-and-holler time. We tried to pick songs that

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all of us knew *Loch Lomond* or *High Noon*. On Sunday mornings we'd hold church services with [illegible] So-and-So presiding. We didn't have a Bible, but some of us remembered Scripture, and we'd recite for an hour or so about God. Then we'd pray. The rest of the week we had nothing to do but sit inside those huts and wait for food or punishment.

Initially we had enough rice; we could even ask for second helpings. Then, in March, about a month after we moved to the new camp, the food supply dried up. Once every four or five days the guards would go to check their traps. If something had been caught, it had probably been dead for a while; other animals had torn off its legs or head. For some reason, when they caught a pig, the guards would stick the raw meat into a bamboo container and let it rot there for several days. It would turn green and start moving by itself. Maggots would crawl all over it, and it would stink so bad that the guards would hold their noses. But we never got sick from eating it. Most of the prisoners were already used to eating intestines, testicles and eyes. I thought they were crazy at first, but after a while it didn't bother me either. At mealtime we'd take turns dipping coconut shells into a pot of cold food brought by a guard. If we had meat, we'd cut it up first to make sure that each of us got his fair share. One afternoon we found a frog under the floor of our hut. We divided it, raw, among the seven prisoners, and I got his heart. It was smaller than a watch stem, but at least it was food. At night the rats came. We caught them in traps baited with rice. The rats were very good eating. We'd cook them to the extent of scaring off their fur, then eat the head, legs, tail, skin—everything. The snakes that we caught were small, but most of them had rats in their stomachs. That was a double feast.

In all the time we'd been at this camp, we never had any medical attention. One of the prisoners had a badly infected tooth; pus was streaming out, and it hurt him a lot. He found a nail somewhere, placed it against his tooth and hammered it with a rock. He chopped it off piece by piece, and that relieved the pressure. I never got dysentery, but we all had diarrhea. We ate charcoal, and that would stop it a little bit, but some guys still had to defecate 20 or 30 times a night. Ants and bugs were crawling all around, and I can't describe the smell.

There were times now when I didn't want to wake up. I figured the war would last another five years; I'd probably die anyway, so it wouldn't make any difference. I knew I'd never get home. I'd never see my fiancée, Marina Adamich, again. I'd never see my mother or my brothers, Klaus and Martin. I knew I'd never fly again either.

Mother says I've wanted to be a pilot since I was seven years old. Whenever I asked for a toy, it was always a plane, and the walls of my room were plastered with pictures of Stukas and Messerschmitts. She tells me also that my father was a wonderful man, an excellent bookbinder and photographer before he joined the *Wehrmacht*. I never really knew him, because he was killed on the Russian front in 1942.

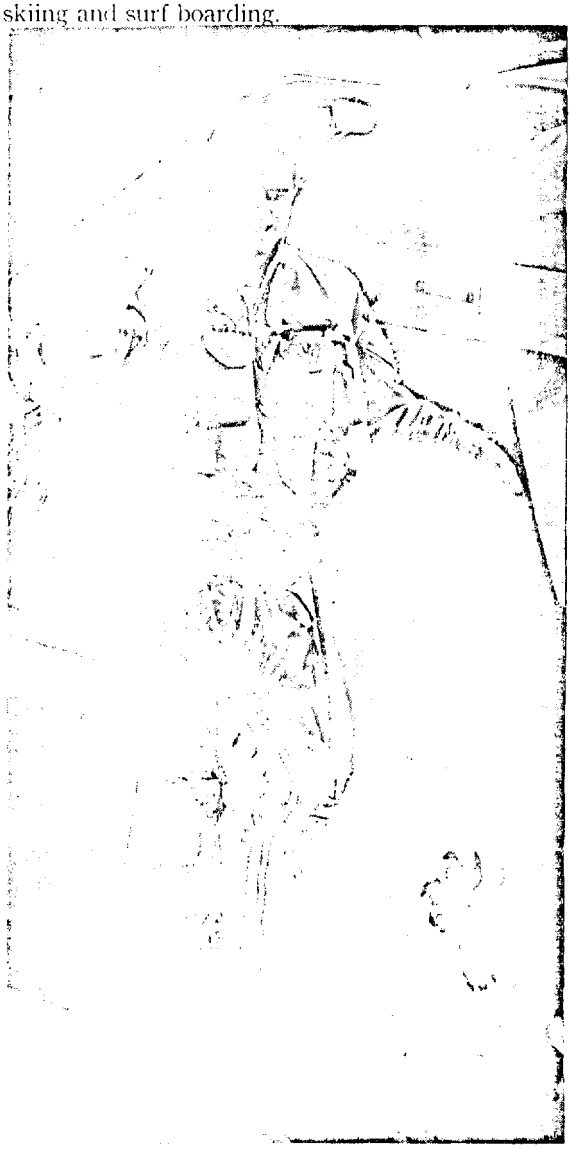
During the war we lived in the city of Wildberg, which isn't far from the Black Forest. My brothers and I used to play in the streets until the fighters came and shot at us. Then the bombing started. I remember going down into the cellars and hearing the women cry. I remember later how the French Moroccans burned our houses down, and [illegible] from other people's garbage cans.

In 1956 an American bookmobile drove through Wildberg. I picked up a flying magazine and read [illegible] the United States. I applied for a visa right away.

Within a month after my arrival in New York in May, 1957, I joined the Air Force. I didn't understand English very well then, so I assumed that everyone who joins the Air Force has a chance to fly. They sent me to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, and I spent the next 18 months in the motor pool polishing cars and trucks. Then they transferred me to Albany, Ga., where I did the same.

By 1960, I was pretty sure that I didn't have much of a future in that motor pool. I had already become a U.S. citizen, but I still couldn't qualify as a pilot until I'd had at least two years of college. When my four-year hitch was up, I drove to California. My brother Martin was living in the Bay Area, so I stayed with him while attending San Francisco City College. Then someone told me that San Mateo Junior College had a fine aeronautical school. In January, 1962, I transferred over there.

And this is where I met Marina. Boy, did she ever keep me at arm's length. At the time, I was living in a battered old Volkswagen bus; I didn't have any money, and she thought I was a bum. She'd always wanted to marry a rich doctor's son. I was doing well in my studies, but I didn't take them too seriously. I was much more interested in skiing and surf boarding.



Back home, Dengler stands on the wing of the "Spad" he helped to "love again" with which he first joined the Navy.

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As soon as I'd finished that year at [illegible], I drove to Alameda and took the test to qualify as a naval air cadet. A few days later I received [illegible] sign on the dotted line." Man, I was already packed. I didn't even go back to San Francisco—just kept driving all the way across the country to Pensacola, Fla. In 18 months I won my wings. In February, 1965, I joined our squadron—VA 145—back in Alameda and started flying Skyraiders. I saw a good deal of Marina, and we talked about getting married.

Then, last December, our squadron left on the *Ranger* for the South China Sea. Marina kissed me good-bye at the pier and said, "Take care of yourself." I told her not to worry. Nothing could ever happen to me.

We sailed to our station at Point Dixie—off the coast of South Vietnam. Then, at the end of January, we headed for Point Yankee. I could feel the excitement all over the ship: Now we were going to fly over North Vietnam. I had thought about the possibility of getting shot down, but I had flown about 20 missions over South Vietnam, and I had gotten used to flak. Still, as we approached Point Yankee, I wrote a letter to my roommate, Lt. (j.g.) Dan Farkas, and asked him to call Marina if I didn't return. I was sure he'd never have to open the letter.

On the morning of February 1, I got up at 5:30 and went straight to breakfast: three eggs, steak, some rolls, a couple of glasses of milk, an apple and an orange. Even before we got the call to man our aircraft, I was up on deck, pretty excited.

Other members of the squadron were also busy checking their planes. We had 22 pilots, and most of us flew Douglas Skyraiders—a plane nicknamed the Spad. Essentially it's a fighter-bomber. It has machine guns, four 20-mm cannons, and it can carry a heavier bomb load than a World War II B-25. I know this will probably sound crazy, but I've had a love affair with the Spad ever since I joined the Navy. There were times when I was stationed in San Francisco that I'd be very upset. I'd drive over to the Naval Air Station at Alameda, climb in a parked Spad and spend the night there. This was my home—my world. And now that world was almost too far away from my miserable surroundings for me to be able to imagine it.

From the beginning we all talked about escape. I remember the first day I came into the prison camp. I said, "How long have you guys been here?" A few guys said, "Two years." "Well," I said, "nice knowing you. I'll be gone in the morning." Then Duane straightened me out. "Don't go now. You won't have any water," he said. "You'll dehydrate; they'll catch you at a water hole and shoot you." I realized that he was right. So we decided to wait for the rains which would begin in May. One of the guys made a crude calendar and scratched off the days with a piece of charcoal. D-Day was to be my birthday—May 22. That planning gave us hope and kept us alive.

In March, we started hiding rice in bamboo containers stashed above our heads. Now and then we picked up empty ammunition clips that the guards had discarded and stored them inside our huts. We rubbed bamboo together to make fire, heated the clips until they were soft, then pounded them with rocks into little knives. I tore up part of my sleeping bag and made a rucksack; another guy made a rucksack out of his shorts. I can't describe the method we used to free ourselves from the footblocks and handcuffs—that information is now being given to other pilots—but I can say that by [illegible] who had the calendar kept crossing off the days.

But the rains didn't come in May. The rice supply was almost gone; the guards caught fewer and fewer animals in their traps, and they began to get [illegible] had told the other guards that if they shot us in the back and dragged our bodies into the bush, they'd have all the food to themselves.

Now we couldn't afford to wait for the rain. Our only chance for survival was to break out right away and try to make air contact. The guards were letting us out of the huts to go to the latrine once a week; our muscles were so stiff that we could hardly walk. If we delayed the escape any longer, we'd be much too weak.

About five o'clock each afternoon the guards would walk to the kitchen, pick up their food in turtle shells, then walk back to their hut. Suppose one of us could wiggle through a hole in the floor of the hut and drop to the ground three feet below. He might be able to burrow under the 10-inch logs which surrounded the stilts and sneak across the open space to the guards' hut. If he could grab a weapon, he could hold them up when they returned from the kitchen.

We put the plan to a vote, and five of us favored it. The other two guys had had bad cases of malaria. They figured that if they stayed in camp, they could persuade Little Hitler not to shoot them. Eventually we managed to convince them that this was our only chance, and they agreed.

We didn't have much time. I carved a hole in the floor of the hut, dropped to the ground and dislodged one of the 10-inch logs with a rock and a bamboo stick. Another guy cut a hole in the wall so he could watch the kitchen. We didn't have watches, but we could time ourselves by counting "One potato, two potato, three potato." How long would it take us to get our knives and rice supply and rucksacks out of their hiding places? How long for us to get out of footblocks and handcuffs? How long for me to sneak out of the back of the hut, crawl across 15 yards of open space and snatch a weapon? The guy with the charcoal added it up. Two minutes and seven seconds, he said.

The food supply was so critical that Little Hitler, Crazy Horse and three or four others went to get rice in a village a few miles away. Only 10 guards remained, and we knew they wouldn't shoot us until Little Hitler returned in a day or two. On the morning of June 28 I decided to go—that afternoon. We voted again, and four of the other guys opposed me. Finally the other guys agreed. "OK," they said. "If the weather is good, we'll go."

The weather was good. At five o'clock the guards walked down to the kitchen. I sneaked underneath our hut, wiggled past the logs and started crawling toward the guards' hut. Duane was watching me from the doorway. Suddenly he whispered, "Look out! Look out." I turned around and raced back into our hut just as a guard came by with his food in a turtle shell. My heart was pounding, but the guard didn't even look in my direction.

Next day, we tried it again. The guards went to eat. I crept underneath our hut, edged past the logs again and dashed across the open space. Two minutes and seven seconds—exactly what the guy had predicted. As soon as I reached the porch, the other prisoners started coming through the hole. I grabbed two M-1's, a carbine and a couple of Chinese rifles. I loaded them quickly, passed them out to the other guys and turned to face the kitchen.

All of a sudden, *bang, bang, bang*. The guards were running out—really coming at us. One of them had just come back from a hunting trip and began blazing away with a rifle. I felt the bullets [illegible] We yelled at them to stop, then returned their fire. Seven guards fell dead

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in their tracks. Three of them fled into the bush.

None of us had been hurt in the exchange of fire; still, we were in trouble. We knew there was a village only a mile or so from the camp. If these three guards had gone to get help, search parties would be after us in half an hour. We had rifles and machetes. Now one guy went back to the hut to get our signaling devices, rucksacks and food. We had to hurry. I didn't even have time to take the shoes from a dead guard.

Five minutes later we were moving out on the trail. Duane and I knelt down to pray. "Dear God, please let us get home. Help us now because we just can't do it by ourselves." Then two of the guys headed east, and we never saw them again. We five walked south to the closest ridge. My feet were swollen and bleeding.

We spent the night near a creek on the side of that ridge. It rained, and leeches swarmed all over our bodies; we were too exhausted to care. We got up again at dawn and decided to split into groups of two and three. Duane and I would stay together. We gave the other guys 24 rounds of ammunition in return for one of their machetes. Then we shook hands and wished them luck.

We had no compass, no idea at all of our position, so we decided to follow the creek. It was rising now because of the rain; in some places it was only five feet wide; in others, more than 100 feet and very deep. On the third or fourth day, we built a raft of banana trees. It took us eight hours. We floated along for several hundred yards. Then we heard a waterfall. We jumped and swam as fast as we could to the shore. The raft swept over the falls and splintered into hundreds of pieces.

We still had our machete, but we didn't dare cut a trail. If we couldn't go straight through a section of bush, we'd go around it or try to bend it or crawl under it on our stomachs. My arms were numb. The skin had been ripped from my feet and legs, and I could see bone.

Both of us were so damned weak. We kept passing out, and we nearly fell over a cliff. At night we'd put our arms around each other and hug each other just to keep warm. We realized now that we might not make it. I promised Duane that if I ever got out, I'd visit his wife and family in Denver and tell them the things we talked about: his goals for the future and the things that he wanted her to do and believe in. He said he'd do the same for me. We shook hands on that.

Then Duane got malaria; his fever was very high, and he couldn't walk. I helped him along, and finally we came to a deserted village. I laid him in a hammock there. We were too weak to walk anymore. Our food supply was almost gone, and our clothes were ripped to shreds. We didn't have strength enough to carry our weapons and ammunition anymore, so we had left them in the bush. We tried to make fire that night, but we were too weak to rub the bamboo sticks together.

Next morning—this was the 14th day after our escape—I left Duane in his hammock and went back into the bush to find the ammunition we had discarded. I slept in the woods that night and then crawled back to the village. Duane was still there. And this was the *greatest* thing. He laughed, and I laughed, and we hugged each other. He was so happy that I'd found three rounds of ammunition, and I was so happy that he was still alive. We broke off the tips of the bullets, poured out the powder and rubbed the bamboo sticks together. Pffft—at last we had fire.

We boiled some leaves and tapioca; it was the first hot meal we'd had in months, and it really cheered us up. We kept the fire going then and tied some rags to bamboo sticks for signaling devices.

Late that night, we heard a plane. It circled over the village and dropped a couple of parachute flares. "Hey, he saw us," Duane cried. "He's gonna get us in the morning." We lay there in each other's arms and laughed. We stayed awake all night talking about what we'd eat tomorrow.

The plane never came back. We waited all that day before giving up. At dawn next morning—the 17th day after our escape—we stumbled away from the village. We stayed on the trail and started up a little hill on our knees. Our arms were draped around each other's shoulders. To our left was the creek; to our right, a small embankment. Suddenly a black-haired guy in a loincloth started running toward us. He carried a long machete—curved at the end. "Amerikali, Amerikali," he yelled. We nodded our heads and mumbled, "Sentai, Sentai" ("hello, hello"). But the man kept running. I jerked back and tried to stand up.

His knife was already moving through the air. Thuk, thuk. The first blow hit Duane on the leg; the second cut into his shoulder just below the neck. He screamed, and I threw up my hands as if to say "No." I knew Duane was dead, but I couldn't grasp it; I just stood there with my mouth wide open. Then he swung at me. The tip of his knife missed my throat by half an inch. I don't know where I got the strength, because I moved, man, I really moved. I turned around and hit that bush and ran up a gully, and my legs didn't hurt anymore.

That night I crawled back to the village. I thought it was *their* village, and I wanted to burn it down. I was angry and a little bit off in the head. I sat in front of a fire and threw everything on it. I didn't care if they caught me.

Then I heard a plane. It circled over the village and dropped about 20 parachute flares. Next morning I waited and waited, but the plane did not return. "God," I said. "What's the matter with those guys?" I knew they wouldn't save me now. I picked up one of the parachutes and tore the panels out. That afternoon, I crawled up to a nearby ridge. I saw a little hut there, and I said, "That's where I'm going to die. I'll lay out an SOS, and if they see me, great. Otherwise that's it. I've done my part."

Back in survival school, I'd learned that a man can live just so many days without food. I wondered how much longer it would take me to die. I prayed. "God, forgive me for the bad things I've done in life. I just can't fight it anymore. Why won't you let me die now? Please let me die. I don't want to wake up."

But I did wake up. I was really thirsty, and I said, "To hell with it. Those guys aren't gonna lick me. I'm gonna crawl until I collapse. That's better than waiting here for death." I thought I could make it to the next ridge. Then I could see the

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ocean. That's where the carriers are. At ... die looking at freedom.

I stuffed the parachute panels into my rucksack and fell down the ridge. The skin had ripped off my feet and they were just bones. But there was no particular pain. I couldn't feel a thing.

I thought of all the things I'd missed. I wanted to go deep-sea fishing. I wanted to ski and build a chalet in the California mountains, and I wanted to buy a Porsche. All these hopes were gone. I remembered that once—back at Lackland Air Force Base six years before—I had thrown away a piece of bread. I swore that I'd never do that again.

My body kept rolling down that ridge and stopped by a river. I had just taken a drink when I saw them: Five or six villagers in loincloths, carrying machetes. I lay very still, and one of them almost stepped on my hand. Then they crossed the river and walked toward another ridge.

I must have passed out dozens of times. Five minutes, 10 minutes, half an hour; I don't know how long. But in my dreams I saw men skiing on fresh snow. Big doors opened, and people came out blowing trumpets. I saw chariot races in heaven, and I heard Duane calling my name. Then I woke up and saw ants crawling over my feet. I stuck them in my mouth; they bit my tongue before I swallowed them.

Next morning—this was the 22nd day after our escape—I took the parachute panels out of the rucksack, tied them end to end and laid out an SOS by the river. I wrapped another panel around a bamboo stick. Then I passed out again. When I came to, I thought I heard a plane.

I knew he'd have only half a second to see me. The river was just 30 feet wide at that point; there were steep cliffs on both banks. I gathered all my strength, started waving that bamboo stick and *zoom*—the plane was past me and gone. But he came back several times and wiggled his wings. A Spad—one of ours—and he'd spotted me. I was so happy that I started crying and shouting and rolling around on my back. Then I collapsed.

Suddenly I heard the helicopter, 200 feet above my head. The steel rope began falling slowly toward me. And there was the rescue harness: a slender device with three little arms folded into its side. I had to press the arms down to make a seat, but I couldn't unzip the plastic cover. I clawed at the harness and finally wrenched one arm free and gave a little signal. I was hanging sideways; I didn't know if I could hold on much longer. Everything was turning around and around and I said, "God, don't let a bullet hit me now. Not after all this hell I've been through." Then I saw a leg and green pants standing in the chopper door. An American leg! I grabbed onto it and cried.

I went back into shock at the hospital in Danang. I weighed only 93 pounds. I couldn't move my arms or legs or head. Yet everything was pleasant and nice. I thought that this was all a dream; I thought this was how it was after death.

Back in San Diego they treated me for kidney disease and liver disease. They fixed my teeth, and when I got malaria—right there in the hospital—they cured me of that as well. At first, I had to sleep on the floor; a bed was just too soft. I had lots of bad dreams, too, and I'd wake up three or four times a night sweating and screaming and yelling.

The doctors say I'm doing pretty well now. I weigh about 150 pounds, and I've got as much energy as anyone else. I still have some ringworm on my feet; there are a couple of bugs inside me that they have to take care of, and I'm losing all my hair. I feel pretty bad about that, but they tell me that it will just be temporary.

Anyway, Marina doesn't seem to mind. We flew to Reno in early October and got married, and I have to admit I'm pretty happy about that. In a few more weeks I should be able to fly again. That will make me happy too. □

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